

COLLABORATIVE HEALTHCARE

INTERPROFESSIONAL PRACTICE, EDUCATION, AND EVALUATION

Interview of John E. Lewis, Jr., MD, MS, FACEP



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Dr. John E. Lewis, Jr., Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine at the Emory University School of Medicine, presented the keynote at the 2022-23 J-SICCC Kick-Off event, exploring the systemic racism fueling the health disparities in our society in a raw, real, and electrifying way. I sat down with Dr. Lewis to continue the conversation. Through his sharing, Dr. Lewis helps us understand our own journeys, what drives us, and how we can improve our healthcare teams and patient interactions. This interview dives deeper into the roots of our disconnections to find the only treatment that will work to make the changes we want to see—empathy and vulnerability. When we are presented with what divides us, it is the work of looking for what connects us, both the good and bad, which makes the difference.

Can you describe your journey of becoming a healthcare provider?

My journey entailed a life-hood fortified with science and humanitarianism through the church. I realized I was baptized and bathed in this ethos of science and social justice. I said, "What could I do with all this love of and proclivity for science and still follow this burning passion to better my fellow

man?" That's when I thought about being a physician. I faced racism along the way and realized all that I experienced was what those before me had fought, and it was my responsibility to fight also. From that point on, I continued to march further and higher to knock down barriers for those who were coming behind me.

When did you find your "voice" and how did you use it to influence the work you do?

My boldness to speak came early in my life. As my parents raised me in the church and with the teachings of the Civil Rights Movement, I was always prepared to speak the right and the good. The fear was not there, but understanding how to get someone's ear was a lesson I learned as an attending physician as patients came into my emergency department: you have to walk alongside the people. I found my voice in listening to the voices of others.

What was your inspiration for using hip hop music and culture in your movement toward connecting the gaps that communities of color experience with the healthcare system?

American music has always been a solvent or method for change. The African drum would communicate it was time to move away and that developed into the Negro Spirituals. The Renaissance of the 1920s created jazz, the soundtrack for Black excellence. Then we progressed to soul music and R&B in the 1960s. And the music of my generation is hip hop. Can't we now tie that to the next Civil Rights Movement, which I believe is health equity? Let's talk about health, about social economics, and let's tie it to the thing that is going to make people dance to it so the next generation will say, "Of course I know that there's structural racism in healthcare.

How do you keep yourself motivated in the movement you've created in moments where it feels like the needle toward progress won't budge?

The needle does not always move, you are exactly right. Change is constant, the direction is not. The laws of the universe say that things will tend to go from a state of order to disorder unless you put energy into the system. So, I realize when things are falling apart, we need to put external forces into it, and for me, that is my faith. While it is disheartening at times when you see the needle move backwards, this current Black renaissance we are experiencing gives people a voice to speak. But that is only temporary. Those voices will be silenced because that is what history and science tell us. And that tells me that we have to do it again, get up on our platforms, rally again, march again. That is how I keep myself motivated because the benefits that I have had, that you have had, is because others did not quit. We may not always win, but at least we keep the score close.

In terms of keeping you motivated, do you have a go-to song for us?

These are my three songs now: "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke is the anthem. It talks about the humility of birth, the unsurety of faith, the determination that change will have to come. "A Song For You" by Donny Hathaway talks about the roles we play, the sincerity and imperfection in those roles, because relationships are what build society. And O.C.'s "Time's Up." It talks about honesty and sincerity in our messaging.

If remnants of racism can never be fully eradicated, how do you wish to see current and future healthcare teams practicing giving their patients the highest quality of

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care despite the systemic and engrained disparities?

I see racism as a symptom, as all -isms are, of a greater disease: selfishness or an unchecked self-interest. This is something that manifests itself in our own bodies and actions. While it is an incurable disease, it is one that can be treated and must be addressed. We are always in remission for these self-serving machinations. I instinctually want what is going to allow me to survive and flourish, even if at the detriment to another group of people. That is why I don't think racism is curable; I don't think our self-serving interests as human beings are curable. If a person is racist or sexist, that is not the root cause. We need to educate the masses on why these things happened and how they continue to recur and manifest and metastasize. Recognize the root causes. When we educate the masses, you will see equity, you will see disparities decrease. It will not disappear because those things are always in play, but you will see an alignment.

Dive deeper into Ciera Osborne's interview with Dr. John E. Lewis